Mad in America
SCIENCE, PSYCHIATRY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Prescription Drugs: The Hidden Costs to Health and the Planet

By **Sam Bowman** - June 18, 2024

According to the IQVIA Institute report, "The Use of Medicines in the U.S. 2024," healthcare visits, procedures, tests, and vaccinations decreased but the number of new prescriptions saw a 3% increase. Pharmaceutical spending in the U.S. is expected to increase by 127 billion dollars by 2028. This is thought to be due in part to advancements in medicines for cancer and diabetes treatments, among others.

However, it's important to take a look at how this steady increase in prescription drug use is affecting the population. It has far-reaching effects—not just for individual health but for the environment. Learn about the hidden costs to your well-being and the planet that prescription drugs are incurring every day, and explore therapeutic alternatives.

The Downsides of Pharmaceuticals for Health Management

While prescription drugs can be lifesaving or increase your quality of life, it can be damaging to rely solely on pharmaceuticals for your well-being. If you are masking pain or other symptoms with drugs, you may not be able to function without them and aren't treating the underlying issues. For example,

you could take antidepressants without accompanying psychotherapy, leading to long-term dependence and a potential relapse of mental health issues. This can make you feel like you aren't in control of your recovery.

In certain cases, pharmaceuticals can harm public health. It's important to realize that, beyond the exorbitant price of prescription medicines, they may come with other costly effects—on your overall health and the environment.

An Overprescribing Problem

The increase in prescriptions over the years is arguably due to more than just pharmaceutical advancements and the introduction of new drugs. According to an extensive literature review by Daniel J. Safer in the Journal of Clinical Medicine Research, medicines are overprescribed at an alarming rate. This is of concern to public health. The most commonly prescribed medications include proton pump inhibitors for gastric issues, levothyroxine for hypothyroidism, antidepressants for mental health issues, and opioids for chronic pain. Adults over 65 are the most at risk for polypharmacy, or taking five or more medications simultaneously over an extended period.

Overprescribing occurs when physicians prescribe drugs in greater amounts or more frequently than necessary. This could be due to a variety of factors, including to boost medical sales or due to "doctor shopping," when patients deliberately hop from doctor to doctor to unethically gain medications for recreational use. In any case, it's dangerous to overprescribe. While some patients genuinely need multiple medications, this isn't always the case and can have detrimental effects—on their wallets and their health overall.

Dependency

The overuse of prescription drugs can lead to dependency on said drugs. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, common drugs such as opioids and antidepressants are psychologically and physically addictive. This isn't always clear to patients when beginning to take medicines, as they are simply looking for a way to alleviate their bothersome symptoms. Psychiatric medicines, in particular, are often overprescribed and neglect to treat the underlying psychological symptoms. Rather than taking a holistic approach, solely relying on medicines can lead to dependence on them.

You may experience an uncontrollable urge to recreate the pleasurable effects of the drug or prevent the unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. Over time, your body can even build up tolerance to the medications and require higher doses to achieve the same effects. Nurturing this cycle of dependence without a backup wellness routine can lead you down a negative spiral for your health, mental and physical.

Adverse Effects

As made obvious in prescription drug commercials, not many pharmaceuticals come without potential harmful side effects. A physician and patient must have a clear understanding of their mental and physical wellness to determine the safety of taking a specific drug. Medicines can interact with each other as well as preexisting conditions, causing unpleasant side effects like nausea, vomiting, fatigue, dizziness, dry mouth, headache, and muscle pain.

This is particularly salient in aging adults who often take more than one prescription at a time. The medicines may interact and cause dire side effects like fainting or seizures that are detrimental for anyone, but particularly those at risk of breaking bones or developing further illnesses. Mental wellness in your golden years is paramount to your overall well-being. If you are masking problems like lack of exercise, poor diet, bad sleeping habits, or unhappiness with a litany of medications, you are more likely to have these negative side effects. What's more, you may feel as though you can't recover or function properly without the use of medication.

Some medicines may even exacerbate mental health issues. A dependence on drugs can also make you feel isolated or damage relationships in your personal and professional life. Prescription drugs are the leading cause of death in America, whether that is from overuse, overprescription, or misuse. Especially in older adults, confusion or dizziness side effects can be detrimental and cause injuries or death. Undiagnosed conditions at any age can be exacerbated by drugs, as well, including bleeding ulcers or conditions that lead to strokes and heart attacks on non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. This is all in addition to overdosing on fatal drugs like opioids.

Prescription Drugs' Impact on the Environment

The impact of pharmaceuticals on the environment is still being studied, but according to the EPA, there is a connection between negative effects and improper production and disposal of prescription drugs. Here are some of the key factors that contribute to environmental damage:

- **Greenhouse gas emissions** from pharmaceutical drug production, adding to climate change;
- **Pharmaceutical waste** that leaches into water and soil, such as antibiotic residues contributing to antimicrobial resistance in harmful insects or toxic chemicals from drugs poisoning animals and aquatic life;
- **Bioaccumulation of pharmaceuticals** in animal and human populations, causing fertility issues and possible cancers;
- **Plastic pollution and infection spread** from improperly disposed needles, pill bottles, and other pharmaceutical materials.

Pharmaceutical companies play a vital role in these detrimental effects, but you can do your part by recycling old pill bottles. This is great for sustainability because it conserves natural resources and energy needed to create new plastic, prevents excess landfill waste, and thwarts microplastics from further polluting water and soil. You can donate, repurpose, or recycle your old pill bottles by looking for a local donation center or upcycling them for crafts or containers. Just make sure you wash them thoroughly to rid of any medicine residue and remove all identifying labels. It's also important to ensure unused medications are disposed of properly. Find a medication disposal center to prevent them from being redistributed into the earth or finding their way into the wrong hands.

You can also educate yourself on the medication you actually need to manage your symptoms or disease. Then, you can focus on a holistic approach to wellness that minimizes your dependence on pharmaceuticals. When you are actively contributing to a healthy planet, your mental wellness can also greatly improve. You have peace of mind that you're not only helping yourself but serving a greater purpose and positively impacting the environment and people around you.

Alternative Approaches to Wellness

When you're aware of the negative effects pharmaceuticals can have on your health and planet, you can start to explore alternative approaches to managing your wellness. This emphasizes a holistic perspective that considers your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. You can incorporate some of the following into your daily routine in conjunction with or apart from taking medications prescribed by your doctor:

- **Engaging in regular exercise** to improve cardiovascular health, strengthen muscles, and boost your mental health;
- **Eating a balanced diet** to nourish your body with whole foods, strengthening you mentally and physically and staving off further illnesses;
- **Getting quality, restful sleep** to enhance cognitive functioning and rejuvenate your body to grow stronger and prevent disease;
- **Practicing mindfulness** to establish a mind-body connection and feel better overall with less stress, anxiety, and negative emotions;
- **Participating in therapy**, whether that's group or individual, and trying out a variety of therapy techniques to see what improves your quality of life;
- **Considering complementary approaches** like acupuncture, massage therapy, and herbal remedies alongside conventional medicine.

When you nurture your mind, body, and soul, you will find yourself less dependent on prescription drugs to go about your daily tasks. It may be a more difficult road to embark on, at first, but it is less costly—to your wallet, health, and the environment—in the long run. Think of your daily habits, in addition to taking pills, as a backup plan to make sure you can function without pharmaceuticals.

Pharmaceuticals seem to overtake every facet of life, but it's important to start thinking critically about what you are putting in your body—and disposing of into the environment. Work with a physician who is open to holistic approaches to find the right combination of pharmaceuticals and healthy lifestyle changes that work for you. When you focus on holistic wellness, you can feel good about your contribution to your health and the planet, and you will reap the benefits of better energy levels, happier days, and a healthier body and mind.

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Sam Bowman

Sam Bowman is a writer from the pacific northwest, who enjoys getting to utilize the internet for community connections across the country. His writing reflects the many passions he has for the world around him. In his spare time, he likes running, reading, and frequenting the local bookstore.